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EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION

Application number: **93103559.6**

Int. Cl.<sup>5</sup>: **B23Q 7/14, B23P 21/00**

Date of filing: **05.03.93**

A request for correction of the word "bucket" into "bucket" in the description, claims and abstract has been filed pursuant to Rule 88 EPC. A decision on the request will be taken during the proceedings before the Examining Division (Guidelines for Examination in the EPO, A-V, 2.2).

Priority: **16.11.92 JP 305551/92**

Date of publication of application:  
**20.07.94 Bulletin 94/29**

Designated Contracting States:  
**DE ES GB**

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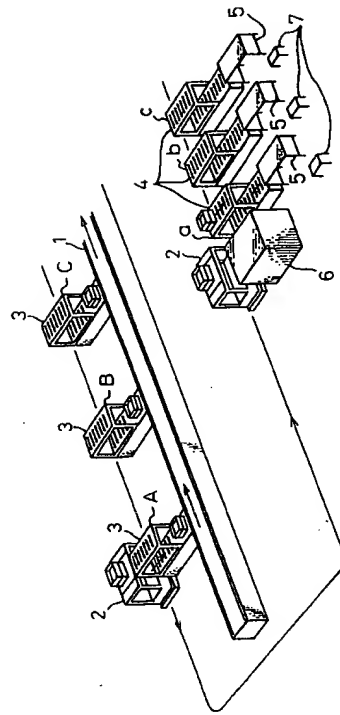
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Parts supply system applied to a versatile production line.

The present invention relates to a parts supply system applied to a versatile production line, which strives to eliminate manual labor and prevent mis-delivery. The parts supply system includes at least one of the product assembling sites (3) on the production line, at least one of the parts supplying sites (4), at least one of the unit assembling sites (5), at

which units are assembled from parts delivered from a warehouse and a plurality of sets are arranged with the units, and a delivery means for delivering the set automatically between each of the product assembling sites (3) and each of the parts supplying sites (4) by an automatic carrier (2) or conveyors.

Fig.2



## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

## 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a parts supply system applied to a versatile production line that manufactures various kinds of products including small quantities on a single production line.

## 2. Description of the Prior Art

In general, a production line for manufacturing products is supplied with parts necessary for assembling the products. The products are assembled, tested and inspected after completion of the assembling operation on the line, and finally are conveyed to a packing site after receiving acceptable test results. It is preferable to provide a separate production line for each product in the case of mass production. However, it is disadvantageous to do so when producing various kind of products or a small quantity of products because required space and production facilities are not effectively utilized and the operators on the line are sometimes idle. Thus the applicant of the present invention developed an invention previously filed at the Japanese Patent Office entitled "A versatile production system" that solves the abovementioned problems.

The filed invention provides only one production line for manufacturing various kind of products including a small quantity thereof. The Japanese Patent Application Numbers of the invention are 4-290314 and 4-291655.

A parts supply system in a prior art comprises a unit assembling site and a kit arranging site. In the unit assembling site, various kinds of units are assembled with parts delivered from a warehouse. In the kit arranging site, various kinds of kits are arranged by collecting necessary units for making up a product at a product assembling site. In such a parts supply system in a prior art, labor is required for delivering units from the unit assembling site to the kit arranging site and delivering kits from the kit arranging site to the product assembling sites.

The parts supply system described above is disadvantageous, especially when only one kit is delivered in container from the kit arranging site to the product assembling sites.

The kit arranging site is absolutely necessary, which is separate from the unit assembling site, so that delivery of the kits between the two sites is necessary, and if assembling robots are employed at the product assembling site, they cannot be used for unit assembling or for kit arranging.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide a parts supply system for a versatile production line that includes an automatic carrier or otherwise for supplying parts, thereby reducing labor and preventing a misdelivery from occurring.

In order to solve the above described problems, the present invention provides a parts supply system that delivers a container loaded with a plurality of units making a product applied to a versatile production system including product assembling sites, testing and inspecting sites, and conveying each product to a packing site on a single line. The parts supply system is characterized in that it includes:

at least a product assembling site on the production line, having a conveying means for carrying the container containing at least one unit;

at least a parts supplying site, having a conveying means for sending and receiving;

at least a unit assembling site located next to the parts supplying site, having a temporary parts storing table for various kinds of parts making up the product; the parts are delivered from a warehouse, in which assembling units from the parts and arranging kits necessary for making each product by collecting the units and placing at least one kit into an empty container returning from the product assembling site are being processed;

an automatic carrier for carrying the container, having double decks, each of which has space for the container; the top deck of which is used for the empty container to be returned to the parts supplying site; the bottom deck of which is used for delivering the container containing at least one of the units making up the product,

a driving means for itself, and

a communication-memory unit that communicates and stores data for controlling the driving means; and

an automatic carrier control means for controlling the automatic carrier to be traversed between the product assembling sites and the unit assembling sites via a battery charger that charges the battery of the carrier when the carrier is waiting for traverse commands in front of said battery charger, including

a plurality of local communication means; each of which is located in each of the product assembling sites, and each of the unit assembling sites and the battery charger;

a communication-memory means of the automatic carrier that communicates the local communication means,

detectors located in front of the product assembling site;

the unit assembling sites and a battery charger, and

a controller for the automatic carrier to generate the command signals in accordance with detector signals received from the communication-memory unit via the communication means.

The present invention provides another parts supply system that supplies trays loaded with a set of units to a versatile production system including product assembling sites, testing and inspecting sites, and carrying each product to a packing site on a single line, wherein the parts supply system is characterized in that it comprises:

at least one of the product assembling sites having a conveying means for carrying the trays;

at least one of the unit assembling sites located next to the product assembling sites at which the trays are arranged with units that are assembled with parts delivered from a warehouse;

containers, called trays, that are made of a plurality of unit blocks flexibly fitting each unit and mounted to make various kinds of products;

two tray stockers connected between the product assembling sites and the unit assembling sites: one of which supplies the trays with units;

the other of which receives empty trays;

robots for assembling products during the absence of operators.

A parts supply system of the present invention may have a conveying means having more than three decks.

A parts supply system of the present invention may have a conveying means having a flat deck with two conveyors side by side.

A parts supply system of the present invention may have a container is basket-like basket, a plate-like pallet, or a tray having blocks; each of which contains a set of units necessary for assembling at a product assembling site.

A parts supply system of the present invention may have a conveying means having a slope.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is an explanatory drawing of a parts supplying method in a versatile production system in prior art;

Fig. 2 is a general perspective view of the constitution of a parts supply system of the present invention applied to a versatile production line;

Fig. 3A is a general top plan view of a parts supply system of the present invention;

Fig. 3B is a perspective view of a parts supply system of the present invention applied to one of product assembling sites on a versatile production line;

Fig. 4A is a top plan view of a parts supply tray of the present invention;

Fig. 4B is a perspective view of a block in a tray of the present invention;

Fig. 4C is an explanatory drawing of a block;

Fig. 5A is a top plan view showing a unit assembling line connected to a product assembling line;

Fig. 5B is an explanatory drawing showing assembling processes on the unit assembling line shown in Fig. 5A;

Fig. 6A is a top plan view showing a production line shown in Fig. 5A, using robots and running 24 hours a day without stopping;

Fig. 6B is a timing chart; and

Fig. 6C is a sectional view cut by the VIC-VIC line shown in Fig. 6A.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Before describing the preferred embodiments, a prior art will be explained.

Fig. 1 is an explanatory drawing of a parts supplying method in a versatile production system in a prior art.

The parts supply system in the prior art shown in Fig. 1 supplies parts for assembling and making a product includes a unit assembling site 11, a kit arranging site 12 and a product assembling site 13.

In the unit assembling site 11, units composing a product are assembled with necessary parts delivered from a stock room. After assembly, units assembled are contained in a basket called a "bucket", and the bucket is then delivered to the kit arranging site 12.

In the kit arranging site 12, necessary units are collected and contained in the bucket. By the way, the contents of this bucket are called a kit assembly. These kit assemblies are delivered to the product assembling site 13 where the kit assemblies are assembled so as to make a product, and the empty buckets are then returned to the unit assembling site 11 or the kit arranging site 12.

However, the parts supply system mentioned above requires manual labor for delivering the bucket from the unit assembling site to the kit arranging site 12, from the kit arranging site 12 to the product assembling site 13, and from the product assembling site 13 to the unit assembling site 11 or the kit arranging site 12. There is a problem although delivering the bucket or the like, in which units or kit assemblies are contained for making a plurality of products is preferable, it is not preferable when a small quantity of products, for example, one product, is required. There is another problem in that expensive robots used for product assembling cannot be effectively used for other

purposes. Furthermore, the kit arranging process cannot be omitted, so that delivery costs are required.

An embodiment of the present invention will now be described.

Fig. 2 is a general perspective view of the constitution of a parts supply system of the present invention applied to a versatile production line.

In the versatile production line 1, parts necessary for assembling and making a product are supplied, the parts are assembled at at least one assembling site on the line, wholly assembled products are performance tested and inspected and the products approved as a result of the tests are then conveyed to a packing site. The versatile production line 1 copes with manufacturing various kinds of products including a small quantity thereof. In the versatile production line 1 shown in Fig. 2, a plurality of product assembling sites 3 are shown, to which a basket containing units for making a product is carried by an automatic carrier 2.

The carrier 2 carries a basket from a parts supplying site 4 to a product assembling work site 3. At a kit assembly arranging site 5, various kinds of kit assemblies are prepared and thrown into the basket at the parts supplying site 4.

In Fig. 2, 2 of the automatic carriers 2 are shown for the sake of convenience, but only one automatic carrier 2 is actually used. During a normal period of time, the carrier 2 is located in front of a battery charger 6 and charged until it receives a command to move to a parts supplying site 4 or a product assembling site 2.

The carrier 2 is controlled by a controller (not shown) based on signals input from detectors provided in front of double decker conveyor units installed in the products assembling sites 3 and the parts supplying sites 4, and in front of the battery charger 6. The signals are input to a communication and memory unit accommodating the carrier from each of the means for communication installed in the product assembling sites 3, the parts supplying sites 4 and the battery charger 6.

Hereinafter, operations of the automatic carrier for a parts supplying system of the present invention will be described.

The carrier 2 moves back and forth between the product assembling sites 3 and the parts supplying sites 4, carrying a basket containing units for making a product from the parts supplying sites 4 on the way to the assembling sites 3, and then carrying the empty basket such that units are removed from the product assembling sites 3 on the return trip to the parts supplying sites 4.

Again at the supplying sites 4, the empty basket is taken out of the top deck, and after filling the basket with units, the basket is then laid on the bottom deck of the carrier 2.

The control signals to move the carrier 2 with a basket are transmitted to each of the communication means in the assembling sites 3, the supplying sites 4 and the battery charger 6 from the controller via a communication cable, and then transmitted to the communication-memory unit on the carrier 2. The carrier 2 moves up to the battery charger 6 and remains there until it receives a signal to move to the assembling sites 3 or the supplying sites 4.

In each of the carriers 2, the assembling sites 3 and the supplying sites 4, a double-decker conveyor is provided; the top of which is for the empty basket; the bottom of which is for the basket containing units for product assembly. The double-decker conveyor, especially for the carrier 2, is wide enough to carry one basket.

For the sake of convenience when explaining the operations of the carrier 2, each of the assembling sites 3 from the starting point of the line is denoted A, B and C in order, while each of the supplying sites starting from the vicinity of the battery charger 6 is denoted a, b and c in order, as shown in Fig. 2.

In the following, as an example, the operation of the carrier 2 that is required to carry the basket with units for assembly at the assembling site C an empty basket is returned after removing the units from the basket and supplying the units to the assembling site A.

In the assembling site C, optical detectors or otherwise detect the absence of a basket containing units, and the controller receives the detector signal via a communication means.

The controller transmits a signal to the communication-memory unit of the carrier 2 via the communication means at the assembling site A, and commands the carrier 2 to move to the supplying site C.

The carrier 2 drives its driving unit after receiving the signal until it arrives at the supplying site C, and when it reaches the supplying site C, the optical detectors or otherwise at the site C detect the carrier 2 and the controller receives the detected signal via the communication means at the site C; the controller then transmits the signal to the carrier 2, and the carrier 2 stops itself. The carrier 2 drives the upper deck conveyor so as to return the empty basket to the site C, and receives the basket containing units on the bottom deck simultaneously. At this time, on the other hand, at the site C, the top deck conveyor is driven so as to receive the empty basket from the carrier 2, and the bottom deck conveyor is also driven so as to load the basket containing units to the carrier 2, after receiving a signal from the controller informing same that the carrier 2 is at the site C.

The carrier 2 moves to the assembling site C, after confirming that there is not an empty basket on the top deck and that there is a basket containing units on the bottom deck by the optical detectors provided therewith.

If there is no command signal to carry the basket containing units to any of the assembling sites, the carrier 2 then moves to the location in front of the battery charger 6, and the optical detectors located in front of the battery charger 6 then detect the carrier 2 and the detected signal is transmitted to the controller via the communication means at the battery charger 6, and the controller transmits the stop signal to the carrier 2.

The carrier 2 remains stationary during the battery charge until the command signal to carry the basket is transmitted from the controller. By this way, the automatic carrier 2 is automatically controlled to carry the basket.

Fig. 3A is a general top plan view of a parts supply system of the present invention. As can be seen in Fig. 3A, there are 3 sets of a kit supply conveyor 21, a unit assembling/kit arranging table 22 and a temporary parts storing table 23 corresponding to 3 product assembling sites on the versatile production line.

Fig. 3B is a perspective view of a parts supply system of the present invention applied to one of the product assembling sites on a versatile production line. In a parts supply system, there are a kit supply conveyor 21, a unit assembling/kit arranging table 22 and a temporary parts storing table 23. Each of the kit supply conveyors 21 has double decks; the top deck being used for carrying an empty basket, or a basket returning from a product assembling site; the bottom deck is used for carrying a basket containing a kit arranged with units assembled with necessary parts.

Each of the unit assembly/kit arranging tables 22 is used for assembling units from necessary parts delivered to the temporary parts storing table 23, and then used to arrange the units and make a kit for use at each product assembling site by throwing the units into the basket.

Each of the temporary parts storing tables 23 is used for placing the necessary parts that are delivered from a warehouse for making units. In the other embodiment, each of the double decker conveyors can be triple decker or more, thereby ensuring that a sufficient number of kits can be stocked, and therefore it is advantageous when manufacturing intervals during production are short. In the case of the triple decker or more, the top deck is used for empty baskets, and the other decks are used for baskets contained with units. The bottom deck is used prior to the other decks. Optical detectors are provided in each deck for determining whether or not baskets are on the

deck.

In another embodiment of the parts supply system of the present invention for a versatile production line, said conveyors for the carriers 2, product assembling sites and the kit supply conveyors 21 can be flat and adjacent to each other, thereby ensuring that the delivery conditions of the baskets can be easily determined even from a long distance when problems arise and that access to the baskets is easy, and it is more advantageous when tall units are contained in the baskets.

Fig. 4A is a top plan view of a parts supply tray of the present invention, and Fig. 4B is a perspective view of a block in a tray of the present invention. The tray is divided into a plurality of blocks. There are 3 different sizes of blocks in this embodiment so as to accommodate different sized units. Thus, different kinds of trays can be prepared in response to different products.

As shown in Fig. 4A, each block 41 is made of a box provided with a conductive pin 42 and a resistance 43.

As can be seen in Fig. 4B, a unit 45 having different shapes can be stored into a block 44 because the block is formed from foam material.

Fig. 4C is an explanatory drawing of a block. In each block, 2 ON/OFF switches are projected outside (not shown). The switches 46 provide an electrical connection between one side of the conductive pins 48 and the other side of the conductive pins 49 through resistances 47.

An input signal entered into a block a is output from h through blocks b, c, d, e, f and g as can be seen in Fig. 4A. The output is checked so as to determine whether the tray is proper by measuring with a robot.

Fig. 5A is a top plan view showing a unit assembling line connected to a product assembling line, and Fig. 5B is an explanatory drawing showing assembling processes on the unit assembling line shown in Fig. 5A. As can be seen in Fig. 5A, the product assembling line 51 is a part of a versatile production line, whereat robots R1 to R4 assemble a product from units delivered on the tray. In the line 52, the tray is arranged including units that are stored in blocks, and each unit is assembled at each location on the line 52 with parts delivered from a warehouse. In this case, a tray arrangement process is the same as the kit arrangement process.

Reference numerals 53 and 54 denote tray stockers that connect between the product assembling line 51 and the unit assembling line 52 at two positions. The tray stocker 53 stocks trays that are provided from the unit assembling line 52, and those are supplied to the product assembling line 51.

The tray stocker 54 stocks empty trays returning from the product assembling line 51 and are fed back to the unit assembling line 52.

As can be seen in Fig. 5B, during a kit arrangement process an operator 55 assembles the unit A and places it on a tray, the operator 56 assembles the unit B and places it on the same tray when the tray is conveyed.

Fig. 6A is a top plan view showing a production line shown in Fig. 5A, using robots and running 24 hours a day without stopping; Fig. 6B is a timing chart, and Fig. 6C is a sectional view cut by the VIC-VIC line shown in Fig. 6A. During a night shift when operators are not working, robots R1 to R4 work to arrange the tray, thereby increasing the workability of the robots.

As can be seen in Fig. 6A, a basket containing units is delivered to the locations 61 beside the robot R1 to R4. The robots R1 to R4 work during a night shift after having their hands changed.

The time chart will be explained with reference to Fig. 6B.

T1 is normal working time. During the time T1, the robot R1 to R4 assemble a product at the product assembling site on the production line, the operators A1 to A4 assemble units on the parts supplying line.

T2 is the working time for the operators B1 to B4. During the time T2, the operators B1 to B4 assemble units on the supplying line and throw the units into baskets, and following that, the robots R1 to R4 arrange trays out of the units in the basket.

T3 is the night working time. During the time T3, the robots R1 to R4 assemble products from the units placed in the trays.

As heretoforth explained, according to the first embodiment of the present invention, the parts supply system with an automatic carrier that eliminates manual labor and has no delivery errors and is applied to a versatile production line, can be realized.

Furthermore, according to the second embodiment of the present invention, the unit assembly/kit arrangement site is located beside the parts supply site, thus, unlike a system in which the unit assembling site, kit arranging site and parts supply site are located separate from each other, so that operators had to carry the basket using a carrier, the present invention can save time and labor costs.

As previously explained, according to the second embodiment of the present invention, product assembly and parts assembly can be done on the same production line, so that time and labor necessary for delivering parts can be saved; thus, a universal and flexible assembling line can be realized.

## Claims

1. A parts supply system that delivers a container loaded with a plurality of units for making a product applied to a versatile production system comprising product assembling sites, testing and inspecting sites, and conveying each product to a packing site on a single line, wherein said parts supply system is characterized in that it comprises:
  - at least a product assembling site (3) on said production line, having a conveying means for carrying said container containing at least one unit;
  - at least a parts supplying site (4), having a conveying means for sending and receiving;
  - at least a unit assembling site (5) located next to said parts supplying site (4), having a temporarily parts storing table (7) for various kinds of parts making up said product; said parts are delivered from a warehouse, in which assembling units from said parts and arranging kits necessary for making each product by collecting said units and placing said at least one kit into an empty container returning from said product assembling site (3) are being processed;
  - an automatic carrier (2) for carrying said container, comprising double decks; each of which has space for said container; the top deck of which is used for said empty container to be returned to said parts supplying site (4); the bottom deck of which is used for delivering said container containing at least one of the units making up said product,
  - a driving means for itself, and
  - a communication-memory unit that communicates and stores data for controlling said driving means; and
  - an automatic carrier control means for controlling said automatic carrier (2) to be traversed between said product assembling sites (3) and said unit assembling sites (4) via a battery charger (6) that charges said battery of said carrier (2) when said carrier is waiting for traverse commands in front of said battery charger (6), comprising
    - a plurality of local communication means; each of which is located in each of said product assembling sites (3), each of said unit assembling sites (4) and said battery charger (6),
    - a communication-memory means of said automatic carrier (2) that communicates said local communication means,
    - detectors located in front of said product assembling sites (3), said unit assembling sites (4) and a battery charger (6), and



a controller for said automatic carrier (2), to generate said command signals in accordance with detector signals received from said communication-memory unit via said communication means.

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2. A parts supply system that supplies trays loaded with a set of units to a versatile production system comprising product assembling sites, testing and inspecting sites, and carrying each product to a packing site on a single line, wherein said parts supply system is characterized in that it comprises:
  - at least one of the product assembling sites (51) having a conveying means for carrying said trays;
  - at least one of the unit assembling sites (52) located next to said product assembling sites (51), at which said trays are arranged with units that are assembled with parts delivered from a warehouse;
  - containers, called trays, that are made of a plurality of unit blocks flexibly fitting each unit and mounted so as to make various kinds of products;
  - two tray stockers (53, 54) connected between said product assembling sites (51) and said unit assembling sites (52); one of which supplies said trays with units; the other of which receives empty trays; and
  - robots for assembling products during the absence of operators.
3. A parts supply system claimed in claim 1, wherein said conveying means has more than three decks.
4. A parts supply system claimed in claim 1, wherein said conveying means has a flat deck with two conveyors adjacent to each other.
5. A parts supply system claimed in claim 1, wherein said container is a basket-like bucket, a plate-like pallet, or a tray having blocks; each of which contains a set of units necessary for assembling at a product assembling site.
6. A parts supply system claimed in claim 1, wherein said conveying means has a slope.

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Fig.1

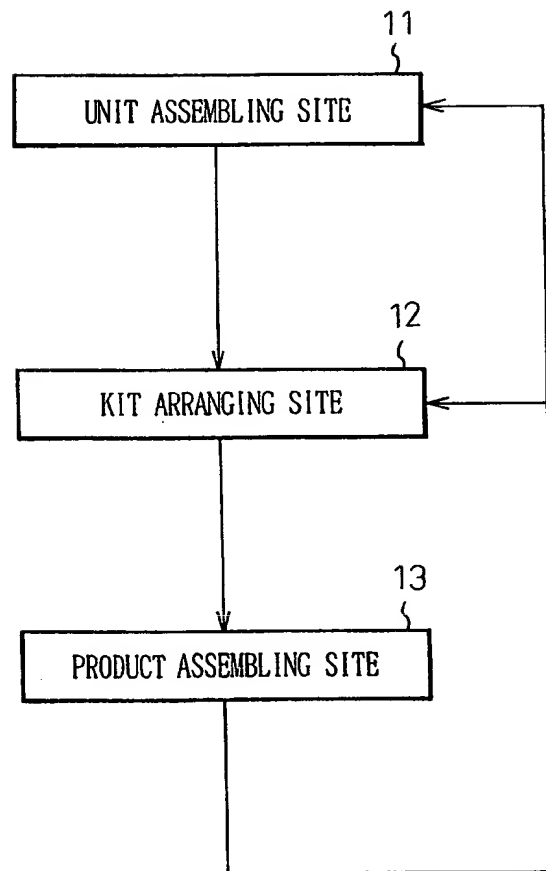


Fig. 2

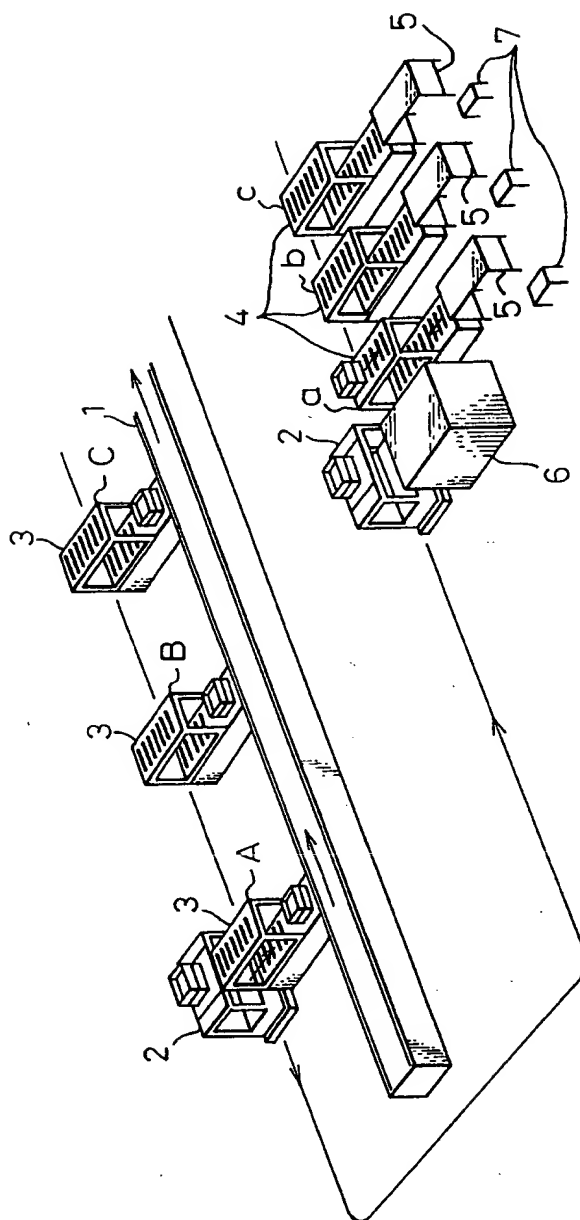


Fig. 3A

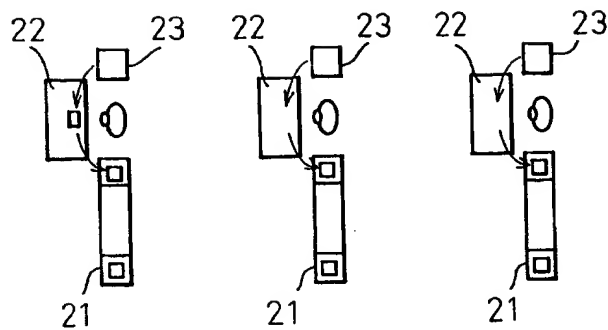


Fig. 3B

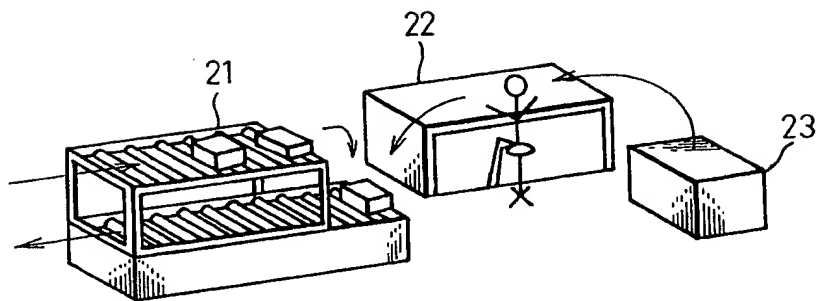


Fig.4A

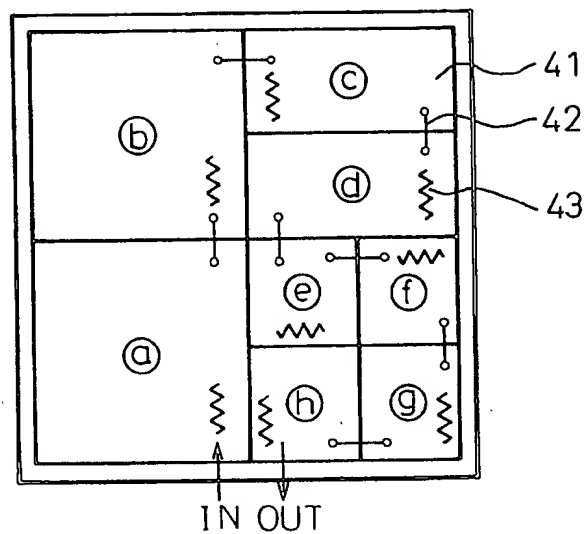


Fig.4B

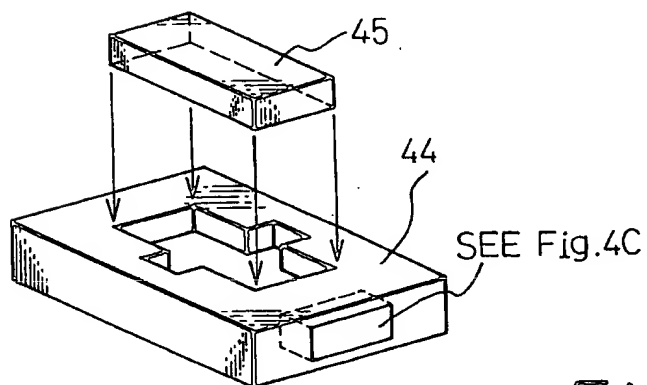


Fig.4C

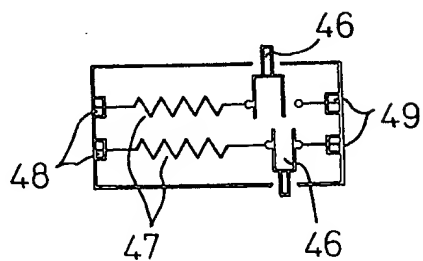


Fig. 5A

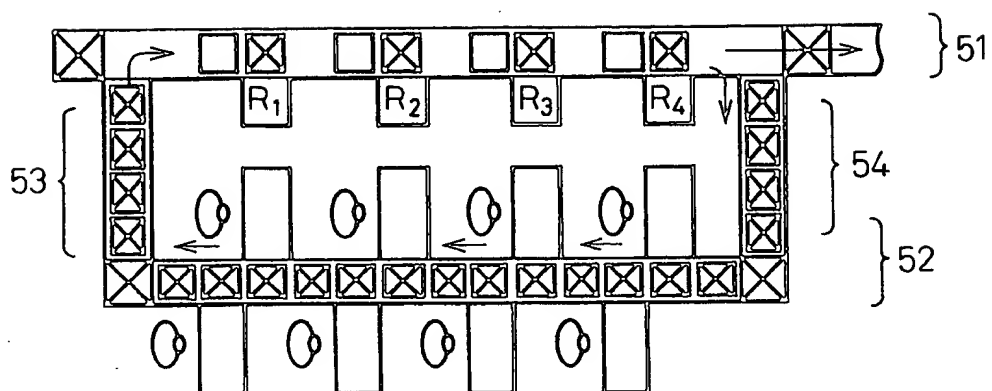


Fig. 5B

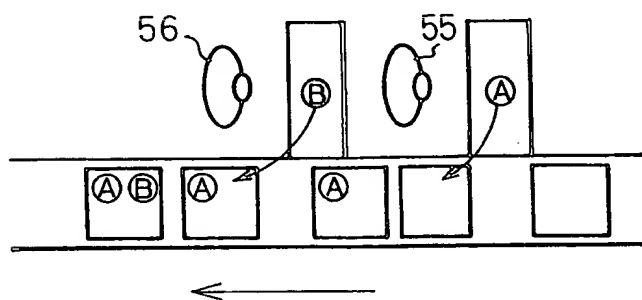


Fig. 6A

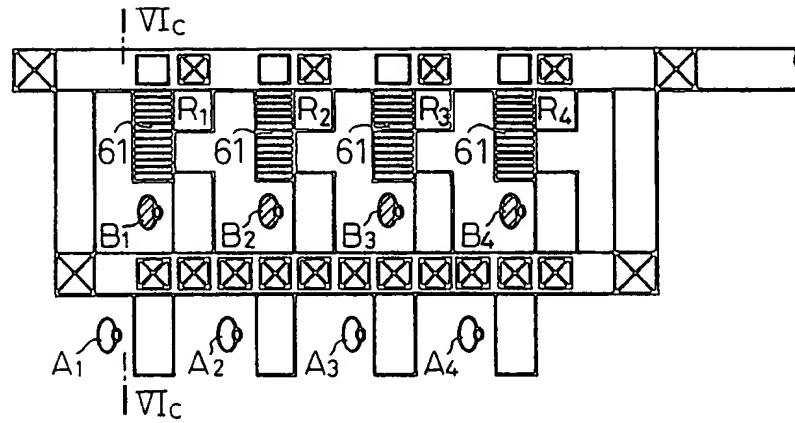


Fig. 6B

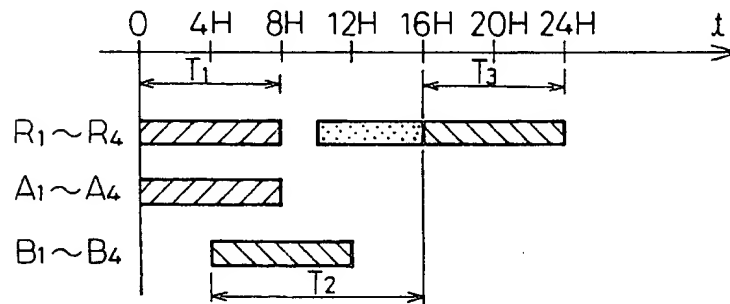


Fig. 6C

